What is a Betrayal Trauma?
What is Betrayal Trauma Theory?

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Short Definitions

Betrayal Trauma: The phrase "betrayal trauma" can be used to refer to a kind of trauma independent of the reaction to the trauma. From Freyd (2008): *Betrayal trauma occurs when the people or institutions on which a person depends for survival significantly violate that person' s trust or well-being: Childhood physical, emotional, or sexual abuse perpetrated by a caregiver are examples of betrayal trauma.*

Betrayal Trauma Theory: From Sivers, Schooler, & Freyd (2002): *A theory that predicts that the degree to which a negative event represents a betrayal by a trusted needed other will influence the way in which that events is processed and remembered.*

Betrayal Blindness and Institutional Betrayal: Betrayal blindness is the unawareness, not-knowing, and forgetting exhibited by people towards betrayal. The term "betrayal blindness" was introduced by Freyd (1996), and expanded in Freyd (1999) and Freyd and Birrell (2013) in the context of Betrayal Trauma Theory. This blindness may extend to betrayals that are not traditionally considered "traumas," such as adultery, inequities in the workplace and society, etc. Victims, perpetrators, and witnesses may display betrayal blindness in order to preserve relationships, institutions, and social systems upon which they depend. (Also, see Eileen Zurbriggen's essay on Betrayal Trauma in the 2004 Election.) The term "Institutional Betrayal" refers to wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g. sexual assault) committed within the context of the institution. The term "Institutional Betrayal" as connected with Betrayal Trauma Theory is discussed in more detail in various publications, including in a section starting on page 201 of Platt, Barton, & Freyd (2009) and in recent conference posters by Smith & Freyd (2011a; 2011b) and by Medrano, Martin, and Freyd (2011). Institutional betrayal is a core focus of the book *Blind to Betrayal*, by Freyd and Birrell, 2013.

Also see:

- Freyd, J.J. (2008) Betrayal trauma. In G. Reyes, J.D. Elhai, & J.D.Ford (Eds) *Encyclopedia of Psychological Trauma*. (p. 76). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Freyd, J.J. & Birrell, P.J. (2013). *Blind to Betrayal.* John Wiley & Sons.
- Gómez, J. M., & Freyd, J. J. (2019). Betrayal trauma. In J. J. Ponzetti (Ed.), *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Intimate and Family Relationships: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (pp. 79-82). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning Inc.

Early History of Terminology

- Listen **Podcast: Sexual Violence & Institutional Courage - Jennifer Freyd**: Host John Markoff speaks with Dr. Freyd about her career of groundbreaking research, from developing betrayal trauma theory to current work supporting institutional courage, *Human Centered,* 3 December 2019.

Jennifer Freyd introduced the terms "betrayal trauma" and "betrayal trauma theory" in 1991 at a presentation at Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute:

- Freyd, J.J. Memory repression, dissociative states, and other cognitive control processes involved in adult sequelae of childhood trauma. Invited paper given at the Second Annual Conference on A Psychodynamics - Cognitive Science Interface, Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute, University of California, San Francisco, August 21-22, 1991.

From that talk: "I propose that the core issue is betrayal -- a betrayal of trust that produces conflict between external reality and a necessary system of social dependence. Of course, a particular event may be simultaneously a betrayal trauma and life threatening. Rape is such an event. Perhaps most childhood traumas are such events." Betrayal trauma theory was introduced: "The psychic pain involved in detecting betrayal, as in detecting a cheater, is an evolved, adaptive, motivator for changing social alliances. In general it is not to our survival or reproductive advantage to go back for further interaction to those who have betrayed us. However, if the person who has betrayed us is someone we need to continue interacting with despite the betrayal, then it is not to our advantage to respond to the betrayal in the normal way. Instead we essentially need to ignore the betrayal....If the betrayed person is a child and the betrayer is a parent, it is especially essential the child does not stop behaving in such a way that will inspire attachment. For the child to withdraw from a caregiver he is dependent on would further threaten his life, both physically and mentally. Thus the trauma of child abuse by the very nature of it requires that information about the abuse be blocked from mental mechanisms that control attachment and attachment behavior. One does not need to posit any particular avoidance of psychic pain per se here -- instead what is of functional significance is the control of social behavior. "

These ideas were further developed in talks presented in the early 1990s and then in an article published in 1994. A more definitive statement was presented in Freyd's 1996 book. More recent updates on the theory and research have been presented by Freyd, DePrince, and Gleaves(2007) and DePrince et al (2012). The ideas are further developed in this new book published in 2013.

Betrayal Trauma Theory Summary

Betrayal trauma theory posits that there is a social utility in remaining unaware of abuse when the perpetrator is a caregiver (Freyd, 1994, 1996). The theory draws on studies of social contracts (e.g., Cosmides, 1989) to explain why and how humans are excellent at detecting betrayals; however, Freyd argues that under some circumstances detecting betrayals may be counter-productive to survival. Specifically, in cases where a victim is dependent on a caregiver, survival may require that she/he remain unaware of the betrayal. In the case of childhood sexual abuse, a child who is aware that her/his parent is being abusive may withdraw from the relationship (e.g., emotionally or in terms of proximity). For a child who depends on a caregiver for basic survival, withdrawing may actually be at odds with ultimate survival goals, particularly when the caregiver responds to withdrawal by further reducing caregiving or increasing violence. In such cases, the child's survival would be better ensured by being blind to the betrayal and isolating the knowledge of the event, thus remaining engaged with the caregiver.

The traditional assumption in trauma research has been that fear is at the core of responses to trauma. Freyd (2001) notes that traumatic events differ orthogonally in degree of fear and betrayal, depending on the context and characteristics of the event. (see Figure 1). Research suggests that the distinction between fear and betrayal may be important to posttraumatic outcomes. For example, DePrince (2001) found that self-reported betrayal predicted PTSD and dissociative symptoms above and beyond self-reported fear in a community sample of individuals who reported a history of childhood sexual abuse.

Numerous additional studies have found indication that betrayal is a psychologically toxic dimension of events -- see also Kelley, Weathers, Mason, & Pruneau (2012).

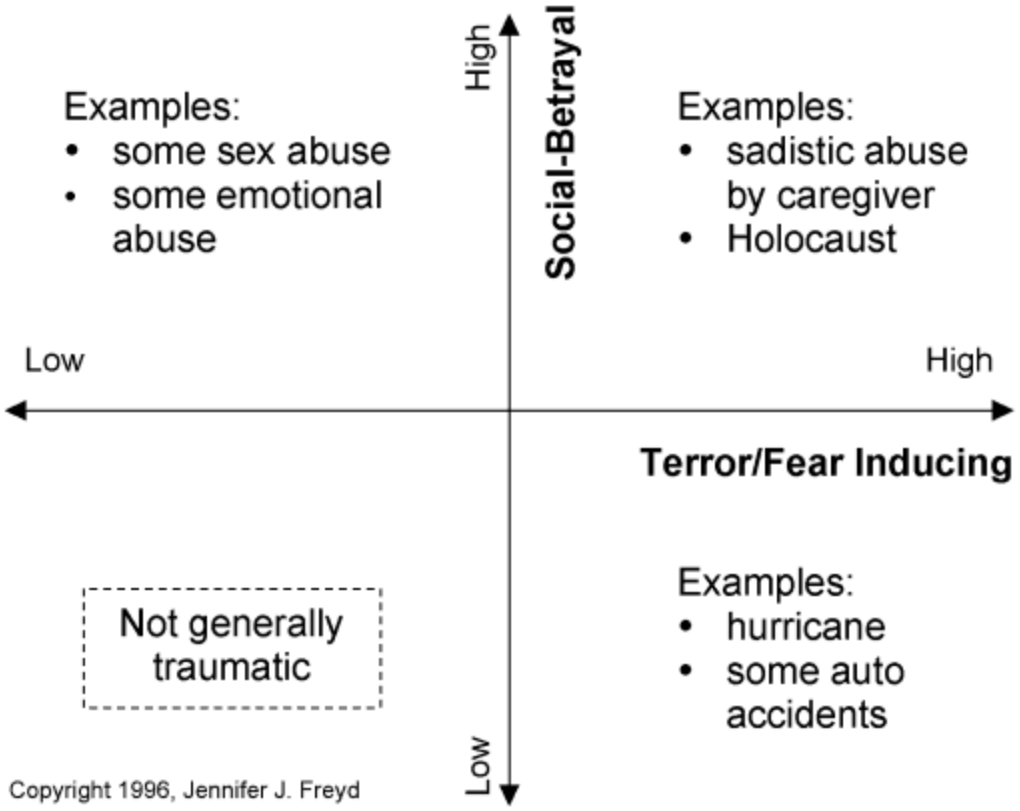

Figure 1: Freyd's Two-Dimensional Model for Traumatic Events

Research

Please see

- DePrince, A.P, Brown, L.S., Cheit, R.E., Freyd, J.J., Gold, S.N., Pezdek, K. & Quina, K (2012). Motivated forgetting and misremembering: Perspectives from Betrayal Trauma Theory. In Belli, R. F. (Ed.), *True and False Recovered Memories: Toward a Reconciliation of the Debate (Nebraska Symposium on Motivation 58)* (pp 193-243). New York: Springer.
- Kelley, L.P, Weathers, F.W., Mason, E.A., & Pruneau, G.M. (2012) Association of Life Threat and Betrayal With Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptom Severity. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25, 408–415.
- Freyd, J.J.& Birrell, P.J. (2013). *Blind to Betrayal.* John Wiley & Sons.
- Freyd Lab Articles

Some FAQs

Is it necessary for the victim to be conscious of the betrayal in order to call it "betrayal trauma"?

The short answer is "no." The following text is from DePrince and Freyd (2002a), page 74-75:

"The role of betrayal in betrayal trauma theory was initially considered an implicit but central aspect of some situations. If a child is being mistreated by a caregiver he or she is dependent upon, this is by definition betrayal, whether the child recognizes the betrayal explicitly or not. Indeed, the memory impairment and gaps in awareness that betrayal trauma theory predicted were assumed to serve in part to ward off conscious awareness of mistreatment in order to promote the dependent child's survival

goals.....While conscious appraisals of betrayal may be inhibited at the time of trauma and for as long as the trauma victim is dependent upon the perpetrator, eventually the trauma survivor may become conscious of strong feelings of betrayal."

An important issue for future research is investigating the role the emotional perception of betrayal has in distress and recovery (see Brown & Freyd, 2008).

Is gender a factor?

It appears that men experience more non-betrayal traumas than do women, while women experience more betrayal traumas than do men. These effects may be substantial (Goldberg & Freyd, 2006; Freyd & Goldberg, 2004) and of significant impact on the lives of men and women (DePrince & Freyd, 2002b). To the extent that betrayal traumas are potent for some sorts of psychological impact and non-betrayals potent for other impacts (e.g. Freyd, 1999), these gender difference would imply some very non-subtle socialization factors operating as a function of gender. A 2009 summary of BT gender findings can be found here. Also see Klest, Freyd, & Foynes, 2013.

Is betrayal trauma related to Stockholm syndrome?

Stockholm syndrome (named for a 1973 bank hostage situation in Sweden) refers to what seems at first a paradoxical reaction to being held hostage. This reaction involves positive feelings toward the captors. Stockholm syndrome is a term applied to the special case of those feelings developing after a hostage take-over, as when an individual or group is kidnapped and held for a ransom. From a theoretical perspective the Stockholm Syndrome reaction may possibly be understood as a special kind of betrayal trauma. The unusual aspect of Stockholm syndrome compared with most betrayal trauma situations is that the strong emotional attachment occurs after the abduction and without the pre-existing context of an enduring caretaker or trusting relationship. It is usually considered that for Stockholm Syndrome to occur the captors must show a certain amount of kindness (or at least lack of cruelty) toward the hostages. From a betrayal trauma perspective the most important elements of predicting Stockholm syndrome would not be kindness per se, but rather caretaking behavior on the part of the captors and an implicit or explicit belief on the part of the victims that survival depends upon the captors. Thus the victims would have to experience the captors as a source of caretaking and as necessary for survival in order to develop the emotional attachment necessary to create a betrayal trauma. Once the captors are experienced as necessary caretakers, a process much like that in infancy could occur, such that the victims have a good reason for attaching to the captors and thus eliciting caretaking behaviors. At that point a certain amount of reality distortion might be beneficial to the victims such that seeing the captors in a positive light might support an adaptive response to their predicament. This theoretical possibility leads to an empirical prediction that remains to be tested. Anecdotal support for the premise that features of dependence and survival are at the heart of the development of Stockholm Syndrome can be found in an FBI on-line article about Stockholm Syndrome:

> "In cases where Stockholm syndrome has occurred, the captive is in a situation where the captor has stripped nearly all forms of independence and gained control of the victim's life, as well as basic needs for survival. Some experts say that the hostage regresses to, perhaps, a state of infancy; the captive must cry for food, remain silent, and exist in an extreme state of dependence. In contrast, the perpetrator serves as a mother figure protecting her child from a threatening outside world, including law enforcement's deadly weapons. The victim then begins a struggle for survival, both relying on and identifying with the captor." (Fabrique, Romano, Vecchi, & Van Hasselt, 2007)

It is important to note that Stockholm syndrome is rare, whereas betrayal trauma events and reactions are, unfortunately, fairly common. Nonetheless, Stockholm syndrome might prove to be a useful extreme boundary condition for investigation of betrayal trauma theory, while at the same time betrayal trauma theory might provide useful insight into behavior of hostages that is otherwise considered paradoxical.

What is betrayal blindness? What is institutional betrayal?

Betrayal blindness is the unawareness, not-knowing, and forgetting exhibited by people towards betrayal (Freyd, 1996, 1999). This blindness may extend to betrayals that are not traditionally considered "traumas," such as adultery, inequities in the workplace and society, etc. Victims, perpetrators, and witnesses may display betrayal blindness in order to preserve relationships, institutions, and social systems upon which they depend. (Also, see this page about betrayal blindness and institutional betrayal and Eileen Zurbriggen's essay on Betrayal Trauma in the 2004 Election.) This topic is further developed in our new book in press.

Are demands for silence a factor in not-knowing about betrayal?

In addition to implicit motivations for not-knowing that the betrayed person may have in order to maintain a relationship, the victim may have other reasons for not-knowing and silence. At least one such reason is demands for silence from the perpetrator and others (family, society). Demands for silence (see Veldhuis & Freyd, 1999 cited at What is DARVO?) may lead to a complete failure to even discuss an experience. Experiences that have never been shared with anyone else may a different internal structure than shared experiences (see What is Shareability?).

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Freyd, J.J. (2020). *What is a Betrayal Trauma? What is Betrayal Trauma Theory?* Retrieved [*today's date*] from http://pages.uoregon.edu/dynamic/jjf/defineBT.html.

What are some local pages related to this one?

- Betrayal Trauma: Books, Articles, Presentations
- Measure: The Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS)
- What is DARVO?
- What is shareability?
- What about Recovered Memories?

What do I do if I need support for myself or a loved one?

I am not a therapist myself and I am not able to answer most of the email I get, so writing to me is not likely to help. I am sorry about that. What I do recommend is that you visit David Baldwin's Trauma Information Pages, and select the "Supportive Information" section there. The web sites listed earlier on this page are also full of useful links that may help you find the support you are looking for. There are also very useful resources and links provided at the sites of Stop It Now, the Sidran Institute and The Leadership Council on Child Abuse & Interpersonal Violence.

For ordering information and additional books, articles, and presentations on betrayal trauma theory see: http://pages.uoregon.edu/dynamic/jjf/trauma.html.

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Last update 23-Aug-2023 , jjf@uoregon.edu
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